

# Washington, D.C.

THIS SPRING, SOMETHING UNPRECEDENTED IS SET TO happen in D.C.: A commuter will walk over to a SmartBike rack, swipe a magnetic-strip user card, unlock a SmartBike, and roll away on the red one-speed. A few blocks later, the rider will park the bike at another of the program's racks and go about his or her business. History will have been made.

The District's SmartBikes, based on the highly popular Paris Vélib system launched last summer, is the first major automated public-use bike system in the United States. Would-be users register online and pay an annual \$40 fee for access to the bikes. It's starting small—10 rack locations and 120 bikes serve a 5-mile-radius area downtown—but is expected to expand quickly, according to Jim Sebastian, the city's bike coordinator. "The system is going to reduce trip times and costs," he says, "and simply give residents and visitors another option for getting around."

Of course, there are many other, lower-profile developments that signal the District's commitment to cycling on all levels. A bike station, complete with bike parking, repairs, rentals and more, is scheduled to open at the Union Station transportation and shopping center early next year. When you go to see the Washington Nationals play at Nationals Park, the new downtown stadium, you can avail yourself of the free valet bike parking in a nearby garage with space for 300 bikes, or lock up at one of the 250 bike racks around the stadium. The city is also expanding its network of bike paths and lanes, installing new, easy-to-follow street signs for cyclists along 75 miles of bike routes and 30 miles of lanes. And bike parking has been a city-council priority—a bill approved last fall increases the number of bike spaces required in residential developments and commercial garages.

As with many of the other cities on our list, the push for change started with local advocates—the Washington Area Bicyclists Association (WABA) has been at it for more than 30 years—but momentum didn't truly build until city leaders adopted cycling on a personal level. Anthony Williams, D.C.'s previous mayor, was a bike commuter and

collector of vintage Italian road frames; in 2001 he hired a city bike coordinator, a position that had been vacant for a decade. Current mayor Adrien Fenty is an avid triathlete. "He has a nicer bike than I do," jokes Eric Gilliland, executive director of WABA. "Our elected officials have really embraced cycling lately, and their attitude has permeated to have an effect on all the city planning."

Still, two-wheeled nirvana is not built in a day. There are challenges ahead for D.C. One is the speed at which new bike lanes are put in: The bike plan says there should be 50 miles by now, but there are only 30. While the bike lanes aren't ideal—motorists can park or drive in them, and they don't prevent riders from getting right hooked by cars turning across the lanes—they are seen as a symbol of a city's dedication to cycling. Sebastian says the shortfall is a minor issue that will easily be rectified by the time the plan is completed in 2015.



**WHAT'S HAPPENING:** SmartBike D.C., a centrally located bike station; valet bike parking at Nationals Park; progress on the overdue Metropolitan Branch trail

**WHY:** The last two mayors have been cyclists; local advocates have been pushing for 30-plus years

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A potentially larger problem is cyclist-motorist relations. Local bike commuters say many cyclists run red lights and disregard traffic laws; cyclists face the same challenges inside the Beltway as they do anywhere cars clog city streets. WABA has produced a pocket guide to local bike laws, but as the number of riders in D.C. continues to grow, these education initiatives will become even more important.